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Mary Whisner, *On Having a Bad Day*, 94 LAW LIBR. J. 335 (2002), <https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/librarians-articles/53>

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On Having a Bad Day*

Mary Whisner**

An intern's perception of a less-than-stellar performance at the reference desk leads Ms. Whisner to consider causes, solutions, and coping mechanisms for the "bad days" that all reference librarians inevitably experience.

¶1 One evening last fall, I relieved an intern in the reference office. The intern said she had had a horrible shift. She said she had not known anything about the questions she was asked, nor had she been helpful to anyone. I guessed that she was probably being hard on herself, and Ann Hemmens, the librarian who had been working with her, backed up my hunch. Ann said that the intern had done a good job: during a busy shift, she had helped patrons in turn, showing them how to use the catalog, getting them started with appropriate sources, and so on.

¶2 Still, the intern was discouraged. Ann and I offered consolation. We told her that, in our experienced eyes, she had done just fine. And, if she wanted to hold onto her subjective belief that she had not, then she might take comfort in the fact that we *all* have bad days. Since it was 5:00 P.M., we encouraged her to go home and do something she enjoys. She mentioned a glass of wine.

¶3 This got me to thinking about bad days. Why *do* we all have them? How can we cope with them when they come? How can we reduce their frequency? How can we minimize their impact on our performance?

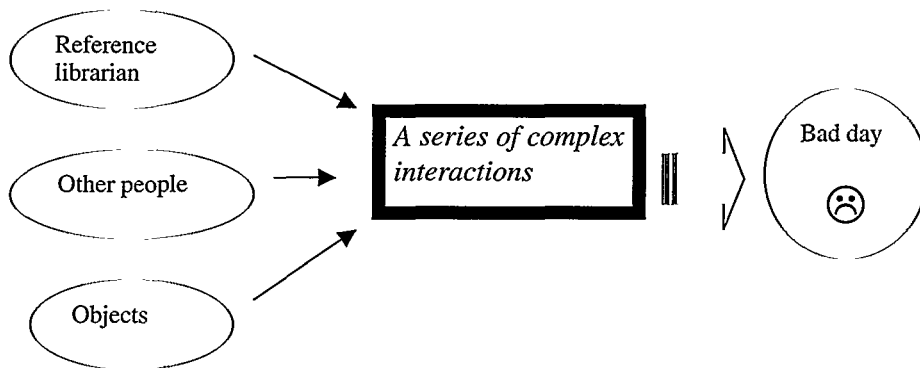
¶4 After careful analysis,¹ I have identified three significant categories of inputs that contribute to a reference librarian's having a bad day. Illustrated in figure 1; these are the reference librarian, other people, and objects (used broadly to include everything from books to fax machines to the weather). Examining the inputs and the process that converts those inputs to the output of a "bad day" will help us answer the questions I posed earlier.

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1. Some of the following discussion is couched as serious social science. I apologize to serious social scientists. I made it up.

Figure 1
Bad Day Inputs



Bad Day Factors

The Reference Librarian

¶5 The reference librarian may be the most important determinant of a bad day. How we come to our jobs strongly influences how we experience them.

¶6 Some Bad Day Factors (BDFs) are professional. For instance, do we have the education, training, and experience to perform our duties? If people are not properly prepared to handle this challenging job, bad days may, alas, come regularly. Even if people are prepared, in general, for the job, their training and experience may affect the risk of having a bad day. The intern, for example, had less than two months of library experience, a fact that may have made her more vulnerable to the stress of a busy shift. On the other hand, she did have many years of legal experience, and this may have caused her to have higher expectations for herself than were appropriate. She was used to being very competent in her former profession, so it was even more frustrating to be a beginner in her new one.

¶7 In addition to professional factors such as training and experience, we all bring our personal attributes and dispositions to work. The likelihood of having bad days in the reference office will differ depending on our individual psychological makeups. I remember an illuminating staff retreat at which we took the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator² and did exercises, under the guidance of a trainer, to help us understand ourselves and our colleagues. Several staff members shared a strong preference for working quietly without interruption. It was eye-opening for

2. By answering a series of simple questions in the MBTI, test-takers are scored along four scales (Extroversion–Introversion; Sensing–Intuition; Thinking–Feeling; Judging–Perceiving). *What Is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)(R)?* Ass’n for Psychological Type, at <http://www.aptcntral.org/aptmbtiw.htm> (visited Jan. 16, 2002). The combination of the four scales places a person into one of sixteen personality types based on the work of psychoanalyst Carl Jung. *What Is Psychological Type?* *Id.* at <http://www.aptcntral.org/main.cfm?fm=type>.

me to hear the depth of their feeling, since I often find it pleasantly stimulating to be interrupted. Happily, these individuals work in departments that have many fewer interruptions than the reference office does. In fact, the very reason for the existence of the reference office is to have a place where the patrons can come or call. (I always try to reassure the diffident patrons who come in saying, "Oh, I don't want to interrupt you," that interruptions are perfectly in order.) If you strongly prefer organizing yourself for a few hours of concentrated work, with no surprise phone calls and no one popping in your door, working in reference puts you at risk for bad days.³

¶8 One's tolerance for interruptions is not the only personality factor that can affect the risk of bad days in reference. Consider the emotional response to people who need help. Some years ago, one of our interns said that he had come to realize that he just did not like feeling that people were coming to him for help. On the other hand, some reference workers find themselves too sympathetic to patrons' sad stories and wish they could help them more. Being at either end of this spectrum might often make you feel you were having a bad day.

¶9 There are other personality traits that might make bad days in the reference office more likely. For instance, if a librarian is sensitive to criticism (as I am), it stings when a telephone patron gets angry and hangs up. If a librarian is a perfectionist, it is crushing to see a patron leave with an incomplete answer—or to find a better source but only when it is too late. (This bothers me, but does not crush me.) If a librarian does not have an eye for detail, mistakes might happen more often—leading to more bad days. If a librarian is not a good listener, there might be more reference interview failures, hence more bad days. And so on.

¶10 These personality factors, while subject to change over time, may be part of our basic makeup. Therefore, they affect whether reference is a good long-term career choice for us in the first place. A host of other personal factors that affect our work—and our having a good day or a bad day—are contingent and contextual. Were you sleepless last night because fire sirens (and the neighbors' dog howling in concert with them) kept you awake? Is your cat sick? Is your best friend going through a divorce? Are you worried about your credit card debt? Do you have to replace your sewer line? Have you had a death in the family?⁴ Are you coming down with the flu? Do you have a headache? If you are not feeling well, physically or emotionally, then you probably cannot focus at work. Perhaps you forget things. Maybe you make careless mistakes. Maybe you are irritable or sensitive or sad. In short, you probably are more vulnerable to having a bad day.

3. This is not just about being comparatively introverted or extroverted; I have worked with some excellent interns and reference librarians who are introverts. In any event, there are limits to what the Myers-Briggs or any personality test can show, and I do not mean to suggest too much here.

4. See generally Penny A. Hazelton, *Hot Topic: Grief in the Workplace*, LAW LIBR. LIGHTS, Winter 2001, at 1 (describing ways that grief can affect the workplace, whether it is staff members' grief for a coworker or one employee's grief for a loved one, and suggesting ways that the library should respond).

Other People

¶11 Our experience at the reference desk is also affected by the people around us. These include our patrons, our coworkers, and our bosses. If they all are practicing what they learned (or should have learned) in kindergarten—sharing, playing fair, putting things back where they found them, and so on⁵—then our reference shifts stand a good chance of going well. But if they are not, those other people may behave in ways that vex us. Patrons are sometimes impatient, rude, foolish, vague, arrogant, demanding, ungrateful, mentally ill, or some combination of the above. Coworkers are sometimes brusque, careless, fussy, grumpy, or some combination of these—perhaps with a few other negatives. Bosses, too.⁶ Face it, other people sometimes behave badly toward us. Their bad behaviors are significant BDFs.⁷

Objects

¶12 Now consider objects. Some of my bad days have involved struggles with the fax machine. Operating it is not my strongest skill—particularly if I am in a hurry or if other BDFs exist. Of course, it is hard to give the fax machine first place among annoying pieces of equipment when I think of the insistent, piercing “beep, beep, beep” sounded by a LexisNexis or Westlaw stand-alone printer in distress. The high-speed printer occasionally rejects my print jobs (a fact I discover only after I go from my fourth-floor office to the second-floor supply room) and can be a BDF on the wrong day. The copier, when it is refusing to make two-sided copies, also can be a BDF. Perhaps you have a few of these or similar objects in your library, too.

¶13 “Objects” are not limited to machines. I also include in this category all the research tools we use—print and online—and the software and other tools we use to communicate our results. Does the index issued in 2002 still list page numbers that were changed when the volume was reissued in 1999? Is the cross-reference either a typo or wholly irrelevant? Are pages missing from the loose-leaf service? Is the needed book off the shelf? Does the Web site freeze up? Is the catalog down? Does Word tell me that it has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down? Is my memo lost in the void? These are but a few of the BDFs in the realm of objects.

Interaction of BDFs

¶14 Now we have a better picture of what can create a bad day. Some contributing factors come into the reference office with the reference librarian—professional

5. See generally ROBERT L. FULGHUM, *ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED IN KINDERGARTEN* 6–8 (1988).

6. These comments concern, of course, other people's coworkers and bosses, not my own.

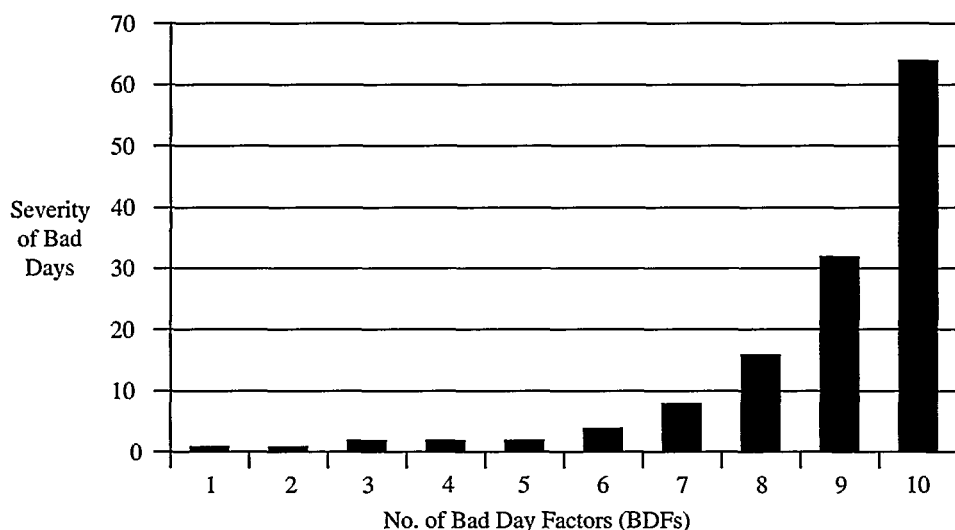
7. See Fritz Snyder & Pat Chapman, *Law Librarians' Pet Peeves*, AALL SPECTRUM, Dec. 1998, at 40 (listing pet peeves, many of which involve the behavior or comments of other people).

background, personality traits, and things happening in one's personal life. Other factors are the behaviors of other people. And the last type of BDFs—but certainly not the least—are the objects that can frustrate and infuriate us.

¶15 How do the factors interact? Most of us can take one or two—or even several—BDFs in stride. The printer has a paper jam? The patron on the phone was rude? The lab assistant forgot to unlock the computer lab? We're okay. We deal with each problem as it arises and go on about our business. We get into trouble, however, when the BDFs pass a certain threshold. After that point, the severity of our bad day increases exponentially, illustrated by figure 2.

Figure 2

Interaction of BDFs



¶16 The picture is more complex if we consider the BDFs that are accumulating. Sometimes they mesh in a particularly toxic way. For example, it becomes a very bad day if one of your personality traits is sensitivity to criticism and you have two or three hypercritical patrons in a row. You may also have a very bad day if one BDF is a demanding patron who is in a tremendous hurry and other BDFs include your computer crashing, the printer jamming, and the relevant book being off the shelf. Readers can imagine other dark scenarios—or perhaps you do not need to imagine them because you have lived them.

Dealing with Bad Days

¶17 Describing aspects of the bad day phenomenon is not enough. Now I want to offer some guidance on coping with bad days, reducing their frequency, and minimizing their impact on our performance.

Coping Strategies

¶18 The first step in coping with bad days is simply to understand that everyone has them. When you have one, you need not conclude that you are inept, weak, stupid—or whatever other term you might use to explain why the bad day is your fault. (You also need not conclude that everyone is out to get you.) Next, find ways to help yourself get over your bad day. I find it helpful to talk to my colleagues for reassurance after an emotionally trying interaction with a patron. Some people like to find a few minutes to be alone, for example, by taking a walk or going out for coffee. Remembering good days—or even things that went right during your bad day—is another way to begin ridding yourself of the bad day. And when your workday is done, spend pleasant time with your loved ones, go to a movie, read a book, or pursue a hobby. Life encompasses much more than work and whatever went wrong in the workplace on your bad day.

Reducing the Frequency of Bad Days

¶19 As well as coping with bad days when they come, we can also work to make them come less often. Consider the factors that lead to bad days. First, the professional factors. If you find that being asked a treaty question is a bad day factor for you, then do some reading, dig into the indexes, go to a class, ask for help from a colleague, or otherwise develop the skills you need so that it will stop being a BDF. Before 175 first-year law students descend on the library with their very first library exercise, try to prepare yourself for the onslaught. Read their assignments and, if necessary, check with their instructors to clear up ambiguities you see. If you are a manager, you might be in the fortunate position of being able to reduce others' risks of bad days, as well as your own.⁸ Make sure that your staff members have appropriate training to handle the challenges they face in reference. Train them, send them to classes, and provide documentation. Try to staff the office adequately to cover the busy times comfortably.⁹

¶20 We also can control—or at least shape—many personal factors. If you are a morning person, volunteer for morning reference shifts, when you will be most alert. If you hate being interrupted when you are working on a writing project, do not try to write in the reference office. You can leaf through a professional journal when business is slow instead. (I have written part of this essay while on duty in the reference office. Today it did not bother me to stop writing in order to help someone run a search in LexisONE. Another day might have been different.) If you find that you become irritable if you haven't eaten, then do not skip breakfast when you are scheduled for a morning reference shift.

¶21 These examples might seem trivial, but such steps can make a difference.

8. Being able to make such a difference is one reason to serve in middle management.

9. Believe me, I know this is not always possible. I schedule our reference office, and I cannot always predict busy times or have extra people on duty when they happen.

However, at different times in our lives we all experience more serious personal problems. The effects of divorce, major illness, or a death in the family are not as easy to mitigate as the effects of skipping breakfast (which can be countered with a granola bar). Nonetheless, we can try to take care of ourselves. Sometimes that means getting help—from family, friends, faith communities, or professional therapists. In times of great stress, it also is helpful to show ourselves some compassion. For instance, if you find that you are forgetting familiar call numbers, book titles, and passwords during the weeks after losing a parent, give yourself a break. Forgetfulness is a common side effect of grief.

¶22 Compassion may also help us when the people around us act in ways that are bad day factors for us. Maybe the rude patrons and cranky coworkers are having bad days themselves. Perhaps if we behave civilly toward them, we can help. And in any event, we might be able to avoid taking their comments and behavior personally.

¶23 We cannot control the behavior of other people, but sometimes we can influence it. If you observe that Friday afternoon always brings some patrons who are cranky when you flash the lights at 4:50, try posting signs so that they know in advance that the library will be closing at 5:00. If you find that your coworker hates being interrupted, try sending him an e-mail note to set up a time to talk, instead of bursting into his office unannounced.

¶24 I will not say much about objects. A lot of library work goes into trying to get them and keep them in order—books on the shelves, computers up and running, typos out of the catalog, and so on. We need to keep trying—and to keep our cool when things go wrong.

Lessening the Impact of Bad Days

¶25 Even if we take steps to reduce the likelihood of bad days, we will still have some. For bad days that can't be avoided, we can build some safeguards into our reference operation so that they do not impair the work of the department. One safeguard is teamwork. Another reference librarian will check my work if I say, "I don't think I'm looking at this problem clearly, could you help me?" If someone in my department tells me that she has a lot going on, I am happy to reduce her hours in the reference office for a few weeks.

¶26 More safeguards come from developing good reference skills and practices. Almost every memo from our reference office to a faculty member ends with a comment such as "I hope this is helpful. If you would like anything further, please let us know." That closing is more than empty courtesy. It is a way of saying that the patron should evaluate the material we give and ask further questions if it is not adequate. This provides some protection in the event we were having a bad day and messed up. We can also follow up on our own. For example, after the first memo, I can write again to say that I neglected to check a database that I later realized was relevant to the request, that I later did check, and here are the results. We also can follow up with patrons who are doing their own research, for exam-

ple, by showing them a source and inviting them to come back to the reference office when they have more questions. This will reduce the impact of the sort of bad day that leads us to forget basic sources or misunderstand people's questions. Finally, if our bad days make us so grumpy that we sulk or say unkind things to those around us, we should apologize and try to do better. We should try to avoid becoming a bad day factor for everyone else.

Conclusion

¶27 Bad days are an unpleasant fact of life for reference librarians. They are caused by the complex interactions of a number of factors involving the reference librarian, other people, and objects. Happily, we can develop coping skills so they do not cause as much distress. We can also act to diminish the risk of having bad days and to minimize the effect of the bad days that happen despite our best efforts at prevention.